

Alexander YAKOVLEV

**DEVELOPMENT  
OF DEMOCRACY  
IS IMPERATIVE  
FOR  
THE RENEWAL  
OF SOCIETY**

Interview Granted by Alexander Yakovlev,  
Member of the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee  
and Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee,  
to Soviet Television on November 26, 1989

**Alexander YAKOVLEV**

---

**DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY  
IS IMPERATIVE FOR  
THE RENEWAL OF SOCIETY**

**Interview Granted by Alexander Yakovlev, Member  
of the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee and  
Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, to Soviet  
Television on November 26, 1989**

**Novosti Press Agency Publishing House  
Moscow, 1989**

C-882467

**Александр Николаевич Яковлев**  
**РАЗВИТИЕ ДЕМОКРАТИИ ПУТЬ К УСПЕШНОМУ**  
**ОБНОВЛЕНИЮ ОБЩЕСТВА**  
**на английском языке**  
Цена 10 к.

**0803010210**

© Alexander Yakovlev, 1989  
© Valeri Korzin, 1989

---

**Valeri KORZIN·** Alexander Nikolayevich, although this programme is called Political Platform, it nevertheless would be nice if this interview did not have a platform like nature. So instead I suggest that we discuss a number of questions that people are asking both themselves and journalists. For instance, about a week ago you came back from Japan, and soon you'll be going to visit Italy. One can't help noticing this busy schedule and the intensity of work. But at the same time a question arises: Aren't we paying too much attention to international events when there is so much to do here at home?

**Alexander YAKOVLEV.** It's true that we have a lot of work to do here, there's no denying that, nor is there any need to. I am aware that some people think that too much attention is being paid to international issues. Such a viewpoint exists, and is even widespread, but it is erroneous. I don't think that we could move ahead in domestic affairs in any serious way if we had not achieved a breakthrough in international affairs. And such a breakthrough has been achieved.

Let's start by looking at the question of what many years of self isolation have brought us. Experience has shown that it has not brought us any good. Economically, it led to the formation of a kind of socialist monopolies whose diktat to the consumer and society reigned supreme. The economy developed according to the principle of serving itself, while ignoring the consumer. It was free from competition, it simply didn't know what it was. That

is why any concern about quality was even hard to imagine. Hence the shortages, the numerous disorders in the economy, the plunder of resources, the ecological crimes, and many other things we are now reaping in full, for they continue to destabilise the situation now as well.

From the intellectual point of view, self isolation has also had negative consequences for society. Let us recall, for instance, the persecution of those involved in genetics and cybernetics. Let us recall how dogmatism was taken to an absurdity, when all creative thought was stifled ruthlessly, when labels were so widespread that they were applied to even the glimmerings of dissent. We feel the vestiges of this, so to speak, labelling psychology in various strata of society to this day. Sometimes, so the saying goes, the only thing one desires is to be able to put a label on another man or at least accuse him of something, of what doesn't really matter.

Politically speaking, self isolation actually provided the objective conditions for depicting us as devils incarnate, "the focus of evil", and a source of aggression, a military threat, and all sorts of other threats.

Because of our isolationism, we put ourselves in the position of a beleaguered fortress. We began to reject anything that was different from us. It also created a climate of self complacency inside the country. As a matter of fact, we stated far and wide and to a large extent our propaganda was based on this: that we had the best of everything, that all was in order, and that everything was just fine with us.

**Valeri KORZIN:** Add to this a reliance on force.

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** Yes, of course. It should be said that the United States of America and the West in general succeeded in drawing us into an insane arms race, which brought many problems, both economic and psychological. Meanwhile, it was frankly said in some of American books even back in the 50s that there was no need to wage a war against the Soviet Union, it could simply be exhausted through an arms race. Somehow we failed to give such discourses the proper attention, although we wrote about them. We missed the point when the necessary attainment of parity began to assume the inertia of a race along an endless spiral. The fact remains

that this strategic line of the West succeeded

It is only now that we are beginning to shovel away the debris of the policy and psychology of self isolation. So, to get back to your question, I think that breakthroughs in international policy are now helping us a great deal in our domestic affairs. Take the question of disarmament. Actually, this is a direct response to the challenge of our era, but it also means material, political and psychological benefits at a time when much is changing in our country, both in its life and in its thinking.

Or take our rapprochement with China. Does it not represent a major historic breakthrough? Or the change in the entire atmosphere in Europe. We are already putting the task of building a common European home on a practical footing. Could it have been imagined even five years ago that we would be discussing such a thing at all? No, of course not.

Detente started with Europe, and the roots of detente did not wither away there, some of its genes stayed there. Europe has had enough of fighting and, more than that, I think it is through with all fighting. It's become obvious to the countries of Europe that they don't need those mountains of weapons piled up on their continent.

**Valeri KORZIN:** Leaving the common European home, I would like to return to the situation here at home. I've heard tell that you're a rather strong chessplayer, and any chessplayer knows that winning depends on being able to plan several moves ahead. When perestroika was started, were the difficulties, which seem to have come down on us like a bolt out of the blue, foreseen?

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** Yes and no. Yes, because, to begin with, perestroika is revolutionary not only by virtue of the idea, the concept behind it, but also in actual fact. It is indeed a revolution. And if it is a revolution, then it has to involve difficulties and a major change in thinking. Especially because we're talking about changes and transformations, the dismantling of outmoded structures in every sphere of our life, social, economic and political, as well as in the people's psychology, its thinking. We realised, of course, that all that would be extremely difficult to bring about. It is a different matter that as we began to analyse what was happening more and more profoundly,

a number of issues came up which can only be described as unexpected. And they were unexpected from different angles, in terms of how acute and widespread they were and in many other respects.

For instance, I think that the political leadership did not fully realise how seriously close the economy was to a crisis. That is to say, that the economy was literally on the brink of setting off a social explosion.

The stagnation era was lucky in a way, undeservedly so. Because commodity prices were so high, it was possible to export these and squander what was earned. Here at home alcoholic beverages were being sold left and right, and this brought enormous revenues. Hardly anyone cared that it was leading to the degradation of society, its moral decline, that it was undermining morality. That money, which was made by society without earning it, contributed to an atmosphere marked by apathy and indifference.

**Valeri KORZIN:** And it also created an atmosphere of tranquility.

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** And one of complacency, self admiration, self praise, of cults, big and small, the tranquility of big and small provincial "princes", of lawlessness and arrogance, all things which, when taken together, deformed morality and, consequently, the socialist way of life.

Take other aspects of this matter, such as conservatism. I'll tell you quite frankly that before 1985, for instance, it seemed, looking back, that there was a sort of romantic blindness based, perhaps, on a hatred for what existed then and on the hope that at last we could do something to move society towards democracy, glasnost, human freedom, and so on. And maybe that romanticism prevented us from seeing the huge mountains of conservatism, habits and parasitism. It seemed to me that all that would be overcome within a shorter time.

**Valeri KORZIN:** And that everybody would immediately join in.

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** That's right. After all, who can seriously think that a lack of freedom and fear are better than freedom?

**Valeri KORZIN:** But to many tranquility is better than movement.

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** And if movement, at whose expense? We want movement, we are for it, we even applaud it, but many think, "I don't want to get involved, let somebody else do all the moving and I'll see what happens." In many ways such thinking can be seen nowa days as well. Otherwise, how can you explain the complaints addressed to Moscow at numerous rallies that it's not doing this or that. Aside from the attempts to manipulate public opinion, and rather dishonestly at that, much here is still a result of a sponging mentality. People think that crime, for instance, can be eliminated in some city if someone will just come from Moscow. Or if a Politburo member would only visit some other city its public utilities could be made to work better.

One of the tasks of perestroika is not only to establish a clear-cut division between legislative, executive and judicial powers, but also to make an absolute distinction in the terms of reference between the centre and provinces. But look how persistently the centre is trying to devolve power to the provinces and how stubbornly they're refusing to take it. Why? Because nowadays power—and this also forms the essence of this turning point—is linked with responsibility, it is not just power, not simply the heady feeling of power, of being able to boss other people around, it is responsibility for everything, from bathhouses and barber's shops to the roads and housing, from food supply to order in the city.

**Valeri KORZIN:** On the other hand, it seems to me that much of what is going on today can only be described as a power struggle.

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** Yes, certainly, the power struggle is definitely becoming more acute. Actually, I personally don't see anything wrong with someone wanting to assume power, wanting to challenge his or her abilities and satisfy healthy ambition. Yet when someone strives for power by manipulating public opinion, when it's a matter of vanity, blind ambition and arrogance, when such moral values as kindness, charity, decency and honesty are ignored, this, of course, cannot but give cause for concern. Who were the first to speak of the real shortcomings? The country's leadership. When the structures of perestroika and the changes going on are attacked by



saying that the old shortcomings are the result of the changes, this is simply dishonest

Perestroika is paying for other people's sins. And history is being very hard on it. Indeed, was it perestroika that created the housing situation? Or the food problem? Or the shortages of consumer goods, the neglect of the public health service and the situation with the country's roads? Can this be blamed on perestroika? Of course not. It is having to pay for other people's sins, and this is aggravating the situation and preventing perestroika from moving ahead at a faster pace to build a prosperous society—something that we deserve.

**Valeri KORZIN.** So we now find ourselves in a rather tight place.

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** True. There's a lot of talk now about a loss of ideals, values, etc.

Society is in a very agitated state, and its thinking is confused. But how could it have been otherwise?

When one hears talk about the loss of socialist ideals, of a humane society, people don't always ask themselves what ideals are meant exactly. What are some of those ideals actually? Take the "ideal" of struggle against one's own people. Is that a human ideal? Of course not. Is the "ideal" of equalisation, which inevitably leads to levelling as regards the individual and his abilities, should that be an ideal of socialist society? And, on the other hand, competition, creative endeavour, human freedom in all its dimensions, freedom from fear, freedom of development, freedom of choice—are these not ideals? If we speak about the deformations of the past, the absence of freedom of choice seems especially striking to me.

I'm not saying that within certain limits it was impossible for someone to display his talent, his creative abilities, but those limits, the possibilities were so narrow that there could absolutely be no talk of any real freedom of choice.

So perestroika means enabling freedom of choice. For instance, if I have freedom of choice, it means I have the freedom to take part in the building of my state, and its economy and social structures, to choose whatever pursuit in life out of the variety of possibilities that would most satisfy me spiritually, that would bring me inner satisfac-

tion, which is perhaps the most important thing for people

That is why when someone talks about the loss of ideals, we first of all must determine what ideals we are giving up, what we are losing, what we should be leaving behind without regret and what we should be taking along from the past, what we can move ahead with, and what we in fact must acquire

Society is still in turmoil and passions are seething. Sometimes things become so emotionally charged that it prevents people from taking a sober minded, realistic view of the situation and, unfortunately, a tolerant, charitable and just view

It would seem that perestroika lays down a moral foundation for the display of the best human qualities: decency, justice and high moral standards in one's relations. At the same time, one cannot help wondering where all this malice and intolerance come from, why this frenzied search for evil spirits, for the culprits? We've been through all that already, and with such tragic consequences

**Valeri KORZIN.** Incidentally, about culprits. In the course of our history the press has often been singled out as a culprit. If crops were not harvested in time, it meant that newspapers had not carried enough appeals for help. If this or that decision was unpopular, it meant that the press had failed to explain it properly. Criticism levelled at journalists has recently become particularly intense: we are being blamed for almost everything. Doesn't this represent a real threat to glasnost and isn't it possible that the helm will suddenly be turned sharply to the right under the pressure of circumstances and opinions?

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** I don't think so. To turn the life of society to the right is now, in my opinion, simply impossible. A system of irreversible elements has emerged in perestroika, even in the most complex sphere, people's thinking, so that a turn to the right is inconceivable. Especially because such a turn will only take us back to the past. You cannot hurry progress from the right, if it can be done at all, it is only from the left.

When now there's so much heated controversy around glasnost and the press, I think that what we are experienc

ing is a sincere misunderstanding stemming from the fact that we have been overwhelmed by the unexpected, by the variety of subjects, journalistic methods, and numerous problems that are coming up for discussion. Indeed, when a closed and powerless society suddenly becomes open and the people acquire a say in things, this, generally speaking, is bound to cause a kind of shock.

**Valeri KORZIN:** And it breaks down the old stereotypes.

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** Yes. It is difficult to get used to the new situation. This is the objective side of the matter that no one can ignore, journalists included. They must understand the state the people are in, their particular kind of psychological confusion.

Secondly, what stands behind the attacks on the press is also a selfish interest. The mass media have taken on themselves distinctive controlling functions. And this is what causes concern to certain strata of any apparatus: this fear of control. It's because they are accustomed to a situation where the people do not know what this or that person in the apparatus is doing. If you now take a fresh look at the whole system of secrecy established in society, you will see, even if you lose your basic sense of humour, that 95 per cent of those secrets are no secrets at all. They are just the defensive reaction of the bureaucrat to shield him from society, from control and from the people. I can quote Saltykov Shchedrin who once observed: "And the secrets we have, they'll really make you laugh." That was how far ahead he looked. These obstructions are now being raked away little by little and society is becoming more and more transparent. Glasnost not only exercises control, it also eliminates these or other structures as unnecessary.

**Valeri KORZIN:** We might like to add that few people like to be controlled.

**Alexander Yakovlev:** Of course. But it would be unfair of me and, perhaps, I would be misunderstood if I did not say that the press, too, very often gives cause for criticism and brings attacks upon itself. Sometimes one gets the impression that there are journalists and authors, who like to help the conservatives rather than perestroika. There are factual mistakes, inaccuracies and a careless attitude to what is said or to human dignity. New dogmas have also

appeared to replace the old ones. And I feel that the new stereotypes and new dogmas, if they are dogmas and stereotypes, of course, are in no way better than the old ones. Some publications have been dwelling far too long on already obsolete subjects of which people are simply tired psychologically. I think that some of the journalists are frozen on the statement-of fact level, as it were.

**Valeri KORZIN:** Alexander Nikolayevich, you have said yourself that perestroika is a difficult business, and it is also difficult for us, journalists, to apply it to ourselves.

**Alexander Yakovlev:** That is true. But nevertheless it is necessary to analyse processes more profoundly, to seek to understand them and to make an objective analysis of the chaotic mixture of views. For instance, they should look to see where this course of any revolution comes from — i.e. extreme leftism bordering on destructiveness. When it does not make any difference what you destroy, whether it is the Party, leasing arrangements, the law or man — anything that comes to hand. Or, say, where and what are the sources of this dismal, but terrible conservatism whose inertia still affects us to this day, puts pressure on us, hinders us and alarms and torments us. At times it also breaks out at some of the meetings. One feels a little terrified when one hears people say "Let me do some steering." And I hear in these words "Let me do some shooting." Evidently, our society still has a long way to go to reach a national consensus.

So, in my view, the task of journalism now is to show real changes in these or other moods in society, by firmly adhering to the platform of perestroika and revolutionary change and understanding at a fundamental level that this is the only way to lead society, even despite its accumulated critical mass, onto the road of freedom, humanism and democracy and towards genuine human relations and moral values. Where do they come from, why do they exist, what are their sources? Of course, it is easy now to be, say, a populist — the situation in the shops is bad, the roads are bad, there is not enough housing and people are being robbed by the apparatchiki. You could collect thousands of accusations of this kind. Such populism always lacks a constructive programme. We haven't got this and that, but what is to be done so that we could have both?

**Valeri KORZIN:** There is already a whole gamut of such accusations.

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** Yes, both from the right and left. In this case I am speaking about right and left wing extremism, and not about the normal and politically healthy mass of the population, those who are guided by elementary common sense in their criticism.

**Valeri KORZIN:** I should like to remind you of one of your favourite sayings: If you lose your faith, you lose everything. And I want to apply it to the question of the Party. You know, of course, that cases of people leaving the Party have now become more frequent and that criticism of the Party is gaining momentum. Don't you think that we are just talking, rather than actually doing anything to restructure the Party, and what is to be done to get the Party to prove by deed that it has been restructured?

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** It is work that is needed now. But there is also a certain paradox here, first of all concerning the psychology of the formation and perception of evaluations. I often think about the time when the Stalinist leadership fought against the people, when there was an orgy of reprisals and innocent people were shot. Did the Party's prestige increase then? If it did, then that is terrible. There were the years of stagnation when people professed double and even triple morality, when they resorted to all sorts of tricks, when the shadow economy was boosted and when both bribe taking and the moral degradation of society were viewed with calm. Did that strengthen the Party? That would also be terrible. The question arises as to who benefitted from all this. The answer is clearly those who are now complaining louder than anybody else that the Party's prestige is falling.

It is the easiest thing on earth to complain that somebody has set some kind of dark force against the Party. In fact, however, most often it comes down to personal ambitions and personal vanity. That's the first thing. The second thing is that there are still many workers who have lost prestige because of their activities. But it is they who have lost it! We have many examples of where both the district and regional committees enjoy both prestige and respect. We should not turn personal faults into social ones, when a person has really fallen out of step with

history for various reasons, someone who even previously did not know how to work, who fears people as the devil fears holy water, who cannot speak to them and who is unable to overcome the long standing habit of haughtiness and conceit and the practice of dividing people into two categories, them and us. Who are "they" and who are "we"? As if there are some chosen people who possess the truth, who are holding Jesus Christ himself by the beard and know everything. And the rest are the masses who understand very little and who, would you believe, are beginning to dictate terms. Some even get angry and say, "I will not be led by the mob."

Where does it all come from? That's where we should do the restructuring. We have been saying for years that the Party and the people are one bone and one flesh and that the Party is the intellect, honour and conscience of the epoch. But it must really be that, and not just seem to be. Then everything will be as it should.

So in those years it was as if the Party's prestige increased, and when the country's present political leadership raised the question of perestroika, spoke openly about what had been before and urged the people to move forward towards freedom, prosperity, humanist values and high moral standards, its prestige began to fall. What really did happen? Isn't it a subject both for a drama and a tragedy? Our philosophers of the 19th century knew how to examine every subtlety of the human soul, why cannot we now understand the depths and layers of psychology, the cruel revolutionary outbursts and the reasons for losses?

It is said that perestroika has already reached its high tide, that now it is ebbing. I don't believe it. If it is so, it means that we initiated something unjust, that we were wrong. I don't agree with that factually, psychologically or politically. An ebb tide is a terrible thing in a revolution, it means a counter revolutionary coup. That is what experience tells us. We should think about that, all of us. But I repeat that I personally do not see such a danger and that is not at all because I want to lull others into a false sense of security with some contrived optimistic considerations. No, not at all. Perestroika is moving ahead. Look, for instance, at the legislative activities of the Supreme

**Soviet** It is adopting law after law which changes the nature of production relations and which will in the long run awaken productive forces, lead to structural changes, and turn the economy to man's advantage. It is all like a money box accumulating capital for perestroika. But we should use it soberly, calmly and reasonably and not waste our strength on unnecessary arguments, wrangling, accusations and counter accusations and other activities dictated by ambition.

We began practical restructuring with the economy, realising that it was a very complex and particularly neglected subject. We believed that by the time that we turned to political reform, the economy would have got off the ground, but that did not happen. And when political reform began to move at a fast pace and when we came to see the essence and the importance of what was happening, the economy lagged behind. As a result, there appeared a gap, a kind of chimney from which black smoke started to belch, in the form of organised crime, demagoguery, destructiveness, fanatical nationalism, and intolerance.

The shadow economy is very strong now. The official economic structures easily assimilate it instead of rejecting it. It is due to their backwardness, because they are not yet adjusted to political reform and are not under the control of democracy. That is the essence of the contradiction of the present stage.

It might seem that democracy ought to place social development under its control and that all sorts of negative phenomena in the economy, the social sphere, human psychology and behaviour ought to disappear under its influence. Nor is there any stabilising factor, say, in the shape of a normal consumer market. The democratic structure has not yet fully taken shape. Elections to local government bodies are still in the future. The process of restructuring in the Party has not yet been completed and it is the forthcoming Party Congress that must make the decisions at this stage of historical development. It is clear that the Party should play the role of a political vanguard. But how? In what way? Which methods should it use? What is a political vanguard and the mechanics of its action? All this should be thought over and all these

problems should be solved by focussing our intellectual, political and social creativeness. Besides everything else, we must look, and look carefully at how the new democratic, economic and social structures introduced by perestroika are shaping up.

**Valeri KORZIN:** Alexander Nikolavevich, a question on another subject if you don't mind. You head the commission on rehabilitation. The problem is not new. Rehabilitation had already started after the 20th Party Congress, but as I see it we conducted rehabilitation at that time while looking over our shoulders at the authorities, seeking somehow not to destroy the established historical stereotypes. At present there is a real desire to carry it through to its conclusion. So have we succeeded in getting at the bottom of things, in finding out the whole truth, in restoring the whole picture?

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** It is an extremely delicate and sensitive subject. It concerns millions of people and I think it is a subject for a whole separate discussion. If television gives me an opportunity, I will speak in detail about what we are doing and what conclusions we are reaching. Now I would say just the following. Yes, the activities of the commission and the principles of its work differ somewhat from what they were at that time. After the 20th Congress the process got under way at a fast pace. And many people were rehabilitated then. But where does the difference lie?

At that time it was merely stated that the particular person was not guilty and his honour and dignity were restored to him. It sometimes concerned the dead, some times the living. And that was all.

Now, however, we are looking to see why all that did happen. What is the background of those events and if you like of the techniques and methods of all that evil? In those days the cases of the so-called "organised groups" were not touched. Four trials were known to the public at large, but in fact there were more than 90 of them. We have just examined the so-called "Bukharin case". It will be followed by the "Kremlin", "Academy" and other cases. Now we are not only examining individuals, although restoring the honour of an individual is the most important thing. Nor are we examining just the cases of the groups I have just mentioned. We are also seeking to deal



with a wider range of problems. For instance, we have examined the decisions of all those "troikas" and "special conferences" and found them illegal.

We are now approaching the problem of the peasantry in the same way. We are studying all those forced resettlements, exiles, and so on, to see whether it is possible to tackle a wider range of issues as we did with the decisions of the "troikas" and "special conferences". So once again we shall be able to see a whole chapter of our history in a different light.

**Valeri KORZIN:** Alexander Nikolayevich, the last question, please. You have a large family, haven't you? You already have grandchildren.

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** Yes, I have, yes.

**Valeri KORZIN:** How many?

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** Four.

**Valeri KORZIN:** A lucky grandad. Well, like any normal person, you naturally cannot but think about their future, about what is in store for them and about the life they are going to have. When you think about this future, do you do so with optimism? If so, what are the reasons for your optimism?

**Alexander YAKOVLEV:** You know, I am indeed an optimist. I believe in perestroika, I believe in the need for the current changes. They are the means for saving our society. I do believe that democracy which is developed in earnest, correctly understood and based on man's freedom, self-discipline and consciousness, as well as on genuine morality can become the irresistible driving force for our social progress in all directions. Democratic development is the only way to build a self-regulating, self-renewing society capable of moving ahead by itself and under its own steam.





Novosti Press Agency Publishing House